The impacts of Narco-Mining on Indigenous Peoples in the Brazilian Amazon: A Critical Political Economy Approach

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Abstract

In Latin America, the expansion of capitalism has progressed through the encroachment on lands rich in natural and mineral resources. These lands often coincide with Indigenous territories. Legal and illegal activities intertwine and mutually reinforce in this process. In northern Brazil, capitalist greed has taken the form of a combined operation between illegal mining and drug trafficking. This phenomenon has become known as narco-garimpo (narco-mining). This article, from the theoretical perspective of the Political Economy of Drug-Trafficking and based on research and empirical data, presents a critical overview of narco-mining, focusing on its impacts on the Yanomami and Munduruku peoples. The objective is to bring visibility to this form of violence, which exacerbates environmental degradation and threatens the existence of Indigenous populations in the Amazon.

Keywords: Narco-mining; Indigenous Peoples, Brazilian Amazon; Capitalism

Introduction

The impact of the so-called 'war on drugs' and its repressive effects on Latin American populations is widely documented in specialized literature. However, a portion of marginalized populations remains invisible: Indigenous peoples.

Victims for centuries of colonial and post-colonial genocide, Latin American Indigenous peoples continue to be exterminated in the name of capitalist expansion. Their ancestral lands are a fundamental part of capitalism's new frontiers on Earth due to their immense biological, genetic, and mineral wealth, as well as their possession of most the planet's freshwater reserves.

In countries like Brazil, the phenomenon of violent and destructive encroachment on biomes and Indigenous peoples occurs mainly in the central-western and northern regions of the country. The North is home to the Brazilian portion of the world's largest tropical rainforest, the Amazon. It is in this region that 403,000 Indigenous people live, representing 64% of the total Indigenous population in Brazil (IBGE 2022). Among the many illegal economic activities that negatively impact Indigenous populations, illegal gold mining and its links to drug trafficking stand out. For logistical and economic reasons, drug trafficking and illegal gold mining have become interconnected in the phenomenon known as 'narco-garimpo' (narco-mining).

In this article, we present a critical overview of the issue of narco-mining in the Brazilian Amazon and its impacts on Indigenous populations. We start from the

hypothesis that narco-mining is one of the most significant current forms of violent appropriation of Indigenous ancestral lands, posing direct threats to the social, cultural, and economic practices of Indigenous communities and, ultimately, to their very existence. We further argue that the Brazilian state's repressive actions to curb drug trafficking and narco-mining add additional layers of violence that contribute to the destruction of various Indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon.

This article does not intend to criminalize gold mining workers, as not all mining areas involve drug trafficking. However, this does not mean that the socio-environmental impacts on Indigenous lands do not constitute an environmental crime. Furthermore, the spatial organization of mining activities is linked to other illegal activities, including human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced labor, illegal deforestation, and the invasion of environmental reserves.

In theoretical and methodological terms, we work with a combination of two perspectives. The empirical material is based on field research conducted in Indigenous territories (Yanomami and Munduruku peoples) in the Brazilian Amazon between 2022 and 2023, particularly in the states of Roraima and Pará. The analysis of this empirical material will be carried out using the theoretical framework known as the Political Economy of Drug-Trafficking (PED), an approach that combines elements of Critical Geopolitics, Marxist Political Economy, and Critical Criminology to analyze the formation and nature of drug trafficking's economic activities and their socio-political impacts (Rodrigues, Cutrona 2025).

Figure 1: Yanomami's and Munduruku's lands

Source: The Authors from FUNAI

Beyond this introduction, the article is divided into four additional sections. First, we present the theoretical and methodological perspectives of our analysis. Next, we examine the impacts of drug trafficking on Indigenous peoples in Latin America, focusing on the Brazilian case. Following this, we explore the phenomenon of narco-mining and its relationship with organized crime groups operating in the Amazon, specifically the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho (CV), which operate, respectively, in Yanomami and Munduruku Indigenous

territories. The article concludes with final considerations that highlight the need to understand the economic rationale behind narco-mining to effectively address this phenomenon for the benefit of traditional Amazonian populations.

Theory and Methods

The study of illegal economies has mobilized significant theoretical efforts over the past fifty years, especially following the acceleration of global markets brought about by capitalist globalization. Today, space-time relations have entered a dynamic never recorded in human societies, deepening the uneven and combined development of increasingly integrated and interdependent economies. This global yet unequal development has had an equally unequal impact on the spaces and populations it affects (Harvey 2019; Motta, Albuquerque 2020; Davidson 2021). These characteristics are also present in illegal economies, as they are an integral part of and have the capacity to enhance the development of capitalism on a global scale (Storti 2012; GI-TOC 2021).

The legal and illegal economies have been two sides of the same coin since the formation of mercantile capitalism (Dewey and Thomas 2022; Ajide and Dada 2024; Rodrigues 2024). In the era of globalized capitalism, the relationships between drug trafficking and various legal and illegal markets have intensified. To systematize an extensive body of literature on the economic rationality of the illegal drug trade, we proposed in another study a theoretical framework called Political Economy of Illegal Drugs/PED (Bergman 2016; Rodrigues and Cutrona 2025; Rodrigues 2024). This model integrates concepts from Marxist Political Economy (MPE), Critical Geopolitics, and Critical Criminology. These three perspectives illustrate how the dynamics of drug trafficking follow market logics that interact with and share principles with the legal market, making them fundamental to the management of global capitalism.

From MPE, PED highlights the social relations of production, circulation, and distribution of a highly demanded global commodity: illegal psychoactive drugs. Psychoactive drugs operate within an inelastic market, meaning that their demand does not automatically decrease with price increases. Because they are linked to structural practices in both individual and collective sociability, as well as to specific patterns of use and habit formation, psychoactive drugs are not easily substituted or abandoned by consumers in response to price fluctuations. For this reason, efforts to eradicate illegal crop production, police and military repression of specific drug trafficking groups, and crackdowns on transnational trafficking routes do not result in a global reduction of the illegal drug market—neither in terms of production volume nor overall price levels.

Repression stimulates innovation among drug trafficking groups. Demand is met through the entry of new illegal economic actors, the introduction of new drugs, and the exploration of new distribution routes. This results in the renewal and continuity of competition among traffickers seeking new territories, new alliances, and new production and distribution methods. This phenomenon is known as the 'balloon effect', a term used to describe shifts in trafficking territories and routes

when former spaces become unprofitable or too dangerous for drug trafficking activities.

Competition between new and established groups—alongside their confrontations with state police and military forces—results in periods of intense violence. New regions are targeted by drug trafficking due to their comparative advantages over older routes and production zones. This competition among various actors within a dynamic and illegal system generates violence and reproduces a geopolitical logic, as territories are crucial for: 1) The production of illegal drugs; 2) The storage and transportation of drugs; 3) The protection of traffickers and their networks; 4) Money laundering and the transformation of profits into assets and lifestyles; 5) The exploitation of other illicit activities in criminal groups' portfolios, such as extortion, charging for public services, etc., and 6) The control and expansion of consumer markets for illegal drugs.

From the perspective of Critical Geopolitics, it is crucial to understand how the occupation, governance, and economic exploitation of space produce and reproduce forms of political and socio-economic exclusion. In our case study, the struggle over territories and routes in the narco-garimpo economy triggers geopolitical disputes that victimize the most vulnerable populations, particularly Indigenous peoples.

Finally, maintaining the logic of the 'war on drugs' results, as analyzed by Critical Criminology, in the selective repression of marginalized social groups, often racialized populations whose very existence presents obstacles to the global reproduction of capital. These include urban poor populations in global metropolises, refugee flows, migrant communities, and a significant portion of Indigenous peoples. We hypothesize that narco-garimpo in the Brazilian Amazon precisely embodies the elements proposed by the PED framework.

Field research, including interviews and systematic observations, raised several concerns about the narco-mining phenomenon. In this article, we focus on case studies of narco-mining operations in two different Indigenous territories: the Yanomami Indigenous Land (in the state of Roraima, bordering Venezuela) and the Munduruku Indigenous Land (in the state of Pará). Both states are located in the Brazilian Amazon.

These two Indigenous peoples were selected because their territories are officially demarcated by the federal government and are therefore under state protection. Nonetheless, both the Yanomami and Munduruku lands have been systematically invaded for the exploitation of natural resources and other economic activities. In both territories, drug trafficking is controlled by Brazil's two largest organized crime groups: the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) in Yanomami lands and the Comando Vermelho (CV) in Munduruku lands. Each group operates through distinct methods adapted to the territories they control.

The observation of each group in distinct Indigenous territories provides a critical overview of how disputes between these groups and foreign groups, such as the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua, have unfolded in the Brazilian Amazon. Thus, the data collected from participant observation and interviews, when analyzed in conjunction with the concepts of Political Economy of Drug-Trafficking (PED), offer an interpretation of the narco-miningo phenomenon and its impact on Indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon.

Capitalism, Drug-Trafficking, and the Indigenous Peoples

When analyzing how the "war against the cartels" in Mexico was instrumentalized to invade ancestral lands, expel or kill Indigenous peoples and local populations, Dawn Paley (2014: 16) concluded that:

> The war on drugs is a long-term fix to capitalism's woes, combining terror with policymaking in a seasoned neoliberal mix, cracking open social worlds and territories once unavailable to globalized capitalism.

What Paley identifies in Mexico at the beginning of the 21st century has become a phenomenon as common as it is invisible throughout Latin America: the systematic aggression against Indigenous peoples, perpetrated both by drug trafficking groups and by anti-drug forces, usually militarized police or specialized units of the region's own armed forces.

The war on drugs and the political economy of drug trafficking expose Indigenous peoples to a crossfire that has intensified with the simultaneous strengthening of both the global illegal drug market and militarized drug enforcement programs. Latin America became part of the global structure of the political economy of drug trafficking as early as the 1960s, when from Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Caribbean coast of Colombia, tons of cannabis were produced and shipped to the United States to meet the growing demand for marijuana, particularly from young people aligned with the political and cultural resistance of the Counterculture.

By this time, the mass market north of the Río Grande had already been consolidated, during what is known as the golden cycle of capitalist expansion, centered on the U.S. industrial economy (Davidson 2020). Across all social classes and for a variety of purposes, the use of psychoactive drugs became one of the most powerful markets in the United States, both in its legal and illegal forms. When, in the 1970s, the rise of neoliberal economics emerged in response to the crisis of capitalism's so-called "golden years", the demand for both legal and illegal drugs accompanied the changes in consumer habits and desires in the Global North. It was in this context that the cocaine economy emerged.

Although cocaine was synthesized in 1859 and widely sold legally in most parts of the world until the 1930s, it was only with the rise of financialized neoliberalism in the 1970s that its stimulating and ego-boosting effects became highly valued. The raw material of cocaine is the leaf of the coca shrub, a plant whose autochthonous variant from the Andean highlands is rich in alkaloids with stimulant properties. The Andean origin of cocaine has been a central element for understanding the geopolitics and geoeconomics of Latin American drug trafficking since the 1970s. Global coca leaf production is concentrated in the Andean countries, with approximately 60% of it in Colombia (UNDOC 2024). This country became the

center of major drug trafficking organizations from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s.

Since the early years of South American drug-trafficking, the Brazilian Amazon has served as a transit route to consumer markets in Europe, the United States, and Asia. Changes in global markets for cocaine and other illegal drugs, combined with militarized anti-drug policies in South America, such as the Andean Initiative in the 1990s and Plan Colombia in the 2000s, have activated elements predicted by the theoretical framework of the Political Economy of Drug-Trafficking (PED). First, there was a "balloon effect," which caused the displacement of routes and the rise of new drug-trafficking groups taking over the businesses of former ones (Perl 1992; Bergman 2016).

The most vulnerable populations affected by drug-trafficking activities and the fight against drug-trafficking coincide with poor peasants, Afro-descendant communities, urban poor, and Indigenous peoples. Across Latin America, marginalized populations are mostly composed of people of Indigenous and/or Afro-descendant origin, stigmatized and exploited since colonial times. The "war on drugs," therefore, criminalizes, incarcerates, and kills primarily these racialized populations, historically segregated and exploited. In Colombia, for example, 49% of territories with illicit coca cultivation are located in territories of Afro-descendant or Indigenous populations (Ministerio de Justicia de Colombia/ UNODC Colombia 2023).

Situations where the political economy of drug-trafficking impacts Indigenous populations are found throughout Latin America. The constant "balloon effect" and violent competition between drug-trafficking groups, as well as their interactions with militarized anti-drug policies, affect Indigenous peoples such as the Mosquitos in Nicaragua, the Ashaninkas in Peru, the Mayan descendants in Guatemala, the Nahuatl and Chihuahuas in Mexico, and Indigenous peoples in Brazil like the Kanamaris, Korubos, Mundurukus, and Yanomami (Labate; Rodrigues 2023).

The regions inhabited by Indigenous peoples coincide with regions that are, simultaneously, disputed and coveted by both illegal and legal capitalism. In most cases, legal and illegal activities are difficult to separate. The rule of law in the countries where such disputes take place rarely reaches remote areas that have been effectively governed for centuries by local caudillos, private companies, armed groups, guerrillas, and other forms of para-state organization.

Ancestral territories and Indigenous peoples throughout Latin America are victims of the current phase of capitalist expansion. However, the countries where these violences occur are signatories to conventions on Indigenous peoples' rights, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) from 2007 (UNODC 2024). As parties to this agreement, and with internal legislation to protect Indigenous peoples, countries like Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Brazil should fulfill commitments such as protecting ancestral lands (Art. 26 of the Declaration), preventing forced displacement of Indigenous peoples (Art. 10), and protecting ancestral knowledge (Art. 31).

Nonetheless, in these countries, there are various types of alliances and interests between governments, bureaucrats from specialized agencies, military forces, churches, and business sectors interested in the natural wealth, biodiversity

of ancestral lands, ancestral knowledge, and even Indigenous peoples themselves, as cheap or slave labor and souls to be converted (Burger; Kapron 2017).

Michel Foucault (2003) analyzed how, at the origins of European industrial capitalism, states developed social policies aimed at ensuring the productive capacity of the working classes while controlling their revolutionary potential. Foucault referred to this set of measures aimed at the care of the population as biopolitics. In times when the state should safeguard the improvement of the population's life, the ideological justification used for violent control was what Foucault called 'state racism.' In the name of the social body's health — or the "race" — capitalist societies legitimize the state to persecute, marginalize, expel, or kill part of their own population. According to Foucault (2003: 62), state racism is:

> a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products. This is the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization.

The *war on drugs* is a device of state racism, as it is a war focused on the most numerous, racialized segments, and those considered "surplus populations" by the classes included in the capitalist system. It represents the repressive selectivity predicted by the theoretical framework of PED (Rodrigues, Carvalho, Policarpo 2022). Indigenous populations have historically been the most marginalized among the marginalized in the Americas, as they were the first peoples to have their lands stolen by European conquerors, their cultural practices demonized and persecuted, and their populations decimated by continuous genocide.

What Paley (2015) analyzes is that, in Latin America, the militarized interventions in Indigenous territories by anti-drug forces are an update of the historical association between the colonial powers' state authority and private enterprises that, as allies, conquered territories and destroyed Indigenous peoples since the 16th century. Under the justification of combating drug trafficking, entire regions of Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Nicaragua, among other Latin American countries, are under military occupation.

This occupation allows Indigenous populations considered rebellious or resistant to the expansion of capitalism to be, as their ancestors were, decimated or subjected to slavery or physical and mental deterioration. This process creates space for private enterprises to occupy lands that offer coveted resources for digital-age capitalism.

Narco-Mining and Organized Crime in the Brazilian Amazon

In Brazil, the issue of narco-mining in the Amazon intensified from 2015 due to both domestic and international factors. Domestically, the speed and destructive potential of the predatory economic occupation of the Amazon were fueled after the coup against Dilma Rousseff in 2016. The administrations of the Workers' Party (PT) between 2003 and 2016, despite supporting the production of commodities — mainly agribusiness and mineral exploration — maintained a commitment to historic left-wing causes such as the demarcation of Indigenous lands and the protection of Brazil's biomes (Carvalho, Goyez, Vegh Weiss 2021).

The far-right government that came to power in 2019 with Jair Bolsonaro had different interests. On one hand, the Bolsonaro government made climate change denialism an official state ideology, considering studies and forecasts on global warming and climate change to be false. On the other hand, it encouraged the occupation of the central-western and northern regions of Brazil, following the same model used during the civil-military dictatorship (1964–1985): the idea that the "development" of the Amazon would be achieved through integration with the center-south region of Brazil and the extensive exploitation of the Amazon's soil and subsoil.

At the same time, the Bolsonaro administration revived the official policy on Indigenous peoples from the dictatorship era. This policy regards Indigenous peoples as second-class citizens, incapable of enjoying the same political, civil, and social rights as other Brazilians, and asserts that they should be "integrated" into Brazilian society through acculturation (Rodrigues, Kalil 2021).

This neocolonial perspective created space for the strengthening of the presence of Pentecostal missionaries in Indigenous villages and for the relaxation of environmental protection laws and laws for Indigenous peoples, enabling the expansion of predatory capitalism in the Amazon (Lobão, Waquil 2024; Ramos 2021). When laws were not altered, environmental oversight agencies and those protecting Indigenous peoples suffered budget and personnel cuts to prevent them from fulfilling their constitutional obligations. Government agencies like INCRA (National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform), IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources), and ICMBio (Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity) were weakened. Additionally, anti-organized crime operations by the Federal Police were subject to political intervention to favor Bolsonaro's supporters (Cyril-Lynch and Paschoeto-Cassimiro 2021).

Furthermore, during the Bolsonaro government, Brazil's Armed Forces regained prestige and resources, increasing their presence in strategic positions within the Brazilian state (Farage, Lima 2021; Rodrigues, Fedatto, Kalil 2021). The process of militarizing the state also occurred within FUNAI (National Indian Foundation), the agency responsible for the protection and interests of Indigenous peoples in Brazil. Under the Bolsonaro government, FUNAI was linked to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security and was headed by military and police officers who supported Bolsonaro. Indigenous specialists and career employees were replaced or intimidated with administrative processes or threats of dismissal.

The presidency of the agency was given to a federal police officer with no expertise in Indigenous peoples and with political connections to agribusiness entrepreneurs. Of the thirty-nine regional offices of FUNAI, nineteen were led by Armed Forces officers, three by Military Police officers, and two by Federal Police agents. Only fifteen remained with career employees from that Foundation (INA, INESC 2022).

The presence of the Armed Forces in the Amazon during the Bolsonaro government did not fulfill the role of strengthening the application of rule of law in the region. Studies produced on the presence of the military in the region between 2019 and 2022 indicate a combination of purposes. On one hand, the objective was to revive the dictatorship-era praxis regarding the Amazon, meaning seeing the tropical forest as a "population void" and a territory supposedly under "international greed"

by foreign powers and the “globalist” rhetoric of environmental protection and Indigenous peoples' rights (Maciel, Rodrigues 2024; Rodrigues, Kalil 2021).

Under Bolsonaro’s government, the dictatorship's slogan for the Amazon, “security and development,” was officially revived, with "security" meaning the defense of Brazil's sovereignty over the Amazon and "development" meaning economic integration into the dynamics of global capitalism without concern for sustainable development or Indigenous rights (Penido, Kalil, Barbosa 2022; Wenzel 2019). The view that still guides the thinking and actions of the Brazilian Armed Forces toward the Amazon is that it is a territory to be protected from foreign invasions and to be exploited by either national capital or capital associated with the interests of Brazil’s elites. Broadly speaking, this perspective on the Amazon has not changed among the Brazilian military after the dictatorship, but it was contained by civilian governments committed to strengthening democratic institutions (Monteiro 2022).

During the Bolsonaro administration, however, no Indigenous land was demarcated, and the number of reports grew regarding military personnel allegedly collaborating with illegal mining in the Amazon, passing privileged information about operations of the Federal Police or the Armed Forces themselves. The most serious case occurred in the Yanomami territories, where illegal mining advanced with the complicity and support of the political and military high ranks of the federal government, connected to drug trafficking activities (Pajolla 2022).

The ease with which illicit activities proliferated during the Bolsonaro government included the growth of illegal mining, particularly on Indigenous lands. The combination of federal government leniency, corruption, and connections between military personnel, police officers, clandestine miners, and drug traffickers allowed the practice of narco-mining to spread across the Brazilian Amazon, impacting both the environment and Indigenous populations, which lost the minimal protection that the Brazilian state had provided them. (Cyril-Lynch, Paschoeto-Cassimiro 2021)

From an international perspective, the Brazilian Amazon became prominently involved in the current dynamics of transnational drug trafficking. The militarized anti-drug efforts in the Andes during the 1990s and 2000s led to a significant shift in the functioning of the political economy of drug trafficking.

Repression centered on the Colombian Medellín and Cali cartels in the 1990s, as well as the FARC in the 2000s, resulted in a relative disorganization of Colombian drug trafficking organizations. While Colombia maintained the highest production of coca leaf and cocaine in the world, these organizations lost a substantial part of their international distribution capacity and their access to key global markets. As has happened systematically since the start of the war on drugs in the 1970s, repression centered on a region, country, or organization does not shake the drug trade but causes shifts in its dynamics.

The relative weakening of Colombian groups created space for Mexican cartels to take over part of the Colombian legacy in the United States. Toward Europe, Eastern European, Mediterranean European, and West African mafias increased their power as international distributors of Andean cocaine. To the South, the changes of the 2000s impacted organized crime in Brazil.

Since the 1980s, drug trafficking groups originated, primarily in southeastern Brazil. Cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the country's main economic centers, became hubs for illegal drug trade activities. In Rio de Janeiro, groups like Comando Vermelho (Red Command) emerged, followed by others like the Terceiro Comando and ADA. Initially formed in the prison system as self-defense gangs for the incarcerated mass, these groups soon gained control over territories in the favelas and peripheral areas of the metropolitan region of Rio. With a discourse centered on identifying with local communities and marginalized populations, these groups began to violently compete for territories in a geopolitical logic applied to local violent competition (Rodrigues 2025; Misse 2011).

The competition was for control of the retail market and to act as intermediaries for international wholesale groups, especially European mafias. From the 2000s onward, the consumer market in Brazil grew so significantly that, by 2010, the country had consolidated its position as the second-largest consumer market for cocaine and its derivatives in the world (Abdala et al 2014.). The market's expansion beyond traditionally larger consumer regions opened competition for new markets across the country (Biondi and Marques 2010). This situation coincided with two events.

The first was the transformation in the dynamics of Latin American drug trafficking. The balloon effect produced in the 1990s and 2000s in the Andes encouraged the use of Amazonian routes for the exportation of cocaine toward Europe. The second event was the growth and expansion of the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). Emerging in the early 1990s from the prison system of São Paulo state, PCC developed a management structure centered on diversifying illegal activities, operating with rigid codes of conduct and clear operational rules.

The PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital) emerged in an environment with less competition compared to the groups in Rio de Janeiro, eliminating small competitors and growing until it consolidated its monopoly over the illegal economy in São Paulo state. By measuring forces with the State, the PCC established a form of mafia peace in São Paulo in the 2000s. As the drug markets and other illegal activities expanded across Brazil, the PCC also grew, starting to operate in all regions of Brazil and in Paraguay, Bolivia, and Peru (Feltran 2018).

For a short time, Comando Vermelho and the PCC worked together, establishing direct contacts with Andean cocaine suppliers. This cooperation began to face difficulties in 2014 and broke down in 2016, generating a period of significant violence in regions of the country where disputes over routes and territories were open. Using principles of the Political Economy of Drug Trafficking (PED), open competition in situations of illegality tends to be violent. The Northeast and North regions, where the Amazon and narco-mining are located, began to face waves of violence between local drug trafficking groups aligned with either the PCC or Comando Vermelho.

In this context, with the reshaping of the political economy of drug trafficking on both international and domestic levels, and in a political environment facilitating illegal activities in the Amazon, the phenomenon of narco-mining expanded and consolidated.

The relationship between drug trafficking and mining cannot be understood as a recent development. Since the 1980s, the Amazon has been used as a crucial route for the flow of cocaine, coinciding with the expansion of mining activities in the region, especially encouraged by the military dictatorship governments. However, in recent years, the organizational structure of mining has undergone transformations that give new meaning to illegal mining. Armed groups or criminal gangs have imposed a territorial control logic financed by drug trafficking.

Hence the term narco-mining was coined, referring to the relationship between these two illicit economic activities: illegal gold extraction and drug trafficking. The term was first used by Federal Police agents in 2021 during an operation called 'Narcosgold'. Since then, much of the media has adopted this designation, which needs to be more accurately conceptualized to avoid associating all mining areas and miners with drug trafficking. However, narco-mining has become a prominent issue (Couto 2023; Couto 2023a).

It is important to note that this is not an argument in favor of extending the war on drugs into a war on mining, even though recent events marking the operations of the Federal Police, National Force, and IBAMA present a conflict scenario materialized by the resistance of miners and armed groups. The relationship between drug trafficking and mining involves a set of operational and organizational strategies, ranging from the use of clandestine landing strips to the political-economic domination of exploited areas.

Another aspect of this relationship can be understood through the trade and retail of drugs within mining areas, generating a dynamic that includes sexual exploitation, labor analogous to slavery, internal trade control, and more. It is important to highlight that mining results in significant labor mobility, as both men and women move to the region seeking opportunities. The majority of these individuals are socially vulnerable. In their attempts to escape poverty, they become even more vulnerable and, in some cases, end up acquiring debts that they can only repay before returning to their homes.

Mining activities in the 1960s were the Brazilian federal government's major bet for regional development, ranging from gold mining to the extraction of bauxite, cassiterite, pig iron, and bauxite. In Pará, the Serra Pelada gold mine was the largest, with about 80,000 miners working under precarious conditions, coming from various regions of Brazil. Even after the depletion of gold in the region, nearly 30 years later, mining continued to spread to other parts of the Amazon.

The state of Pará is home to the largest number of illegal mining operations, with many concentrated in the Tapajós River basin, in the southwestern part of the state, which has become the epicenter of mining activities in the Legal Amazon. Illegal mining is an economic activity that poses a significant threat to the ecological balance of rivers and forests. It is also a threat to Indigenous Lands and Conservation Units designated as Integral Protection Units, where the Munduruku and Sai Cinza Indigenous Lands are located, along with 124 other conservation units, in contrast with 418 active mining sites.

Mining in Amazonas and Roraima promotes the invasion of Munduruku, Kaiapó, and Yanomami Indigenous Lands. As the scale of mining exploitation expands, human rights violations also increase. It is therefore a social, ecological, political,

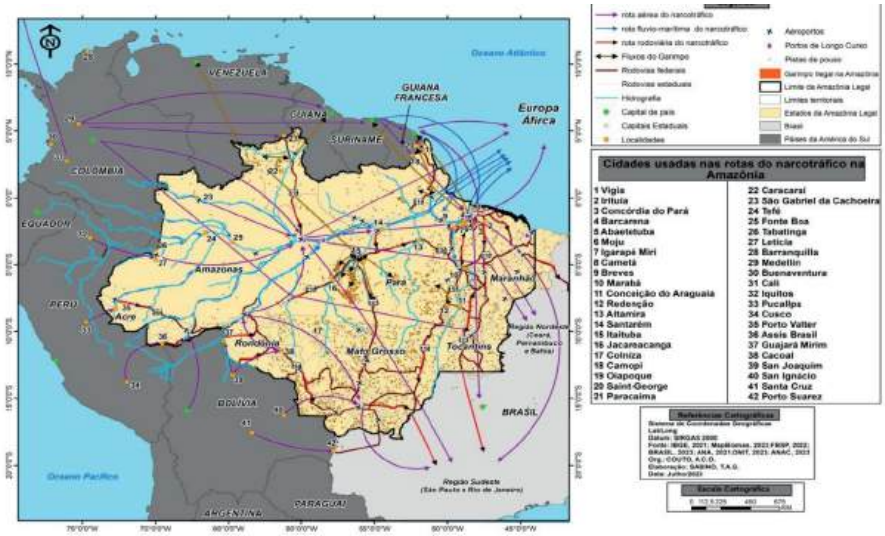
economic, and cultural problem. Considering all that has been discussed, the issue of illegal mining extends beyond a debate about public security and community health, involving issues related to regional development.

The expansion of narco-mining becomes a threat not only to Indigenous peoples but also to riverside communities, Afro-descendant populations (quilombolas), and peasant communities whose territories are invaded by criminal organizations. The networks of drug trafficking in the region extend everywhere, making traditional populations vulnerable and compromising their entire ancestry and identity roots.

During field research, it was possible to observe the connection between various illegal activities that constitute environmental crimes and are linked to drug trafficking in the Amazon region, such as gold mining, illegal logging, and wildlife trafficking, among others. The combination of illegal activities attracts criminal groups from southeastern Brazil (PCC and CV), Colombia (such as dissident FARC groups), and Venezuela (e.g., Tren de Aragua).

The socio-spatial structure of mining serves the various demands of drug trafficking, especially when there are numerous possibilities to increase investments through relationships established within the territory involving both public and private agents. In both the Yanomami and Munduruku Indigenous Lands, it is possible to identify business models that involve agents from the CV and PCC. On the other hand, the region has been the stage for the emergence of local and regional drug trafficking groups that had significant influence in controlling illegal activities, initially allies of the southeastern Brazilian groups and, later, some of them becoming enemies.

Figure 2: Drug-Trafficking Routes and Illegal Mining Flows in the Amazon



Source: Instituto Mãe Crioula available at: www.maecrioula.org.br

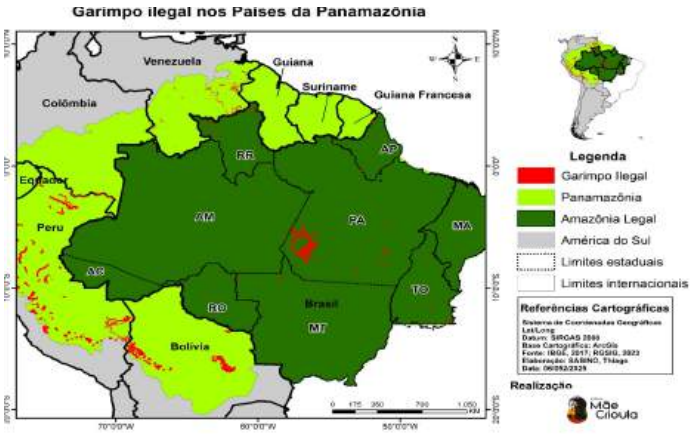
Criminal organizations in the Amazon impose a political geography through territorial control, which leads to conflicts between rival groups, imposition of fees on residents and merchants, and practices of torture and murder through the so-called "crime tribunals."[1] In the state of Amazonas, the Família Do Norte (FDN) criminal group was founded in 2007, much like the PCC and CV, emerging from the prison system. The FDN began controlling the Solimões route, through which much of the cocaine from Peru enters, distributing the drug to the northern region of Brazil and negotiating with the CV from Rio de Janeiro, their former ally. The FDN developed other illegal activities, such as arms trafficking and money laundering, including gold trade. The FDN has virtually ceased to exist today. After internal splits and the deaths of its leaders, part of the group was absorbed by the CV and another part by the PCC.

In the state of Pará, the Primeiro Comando do Norte (PCN) was founded in 2007, an ally of the PCC. It was created as a strategy by the PCC to extend its influence in the region's prison system and control the drug trafficking market and routes in Altamira and Marabá, two key cities in the Brazilian Amazon. Following the imprisonment of several PCN members, the group was extinguished. However, in 2017, the Comando Classe A (CCA) emerged in the Altamira prison, allying itself with the PCC and becoming its arm in the region. The CCA represents the union of the PCC with other regional groups from the Amazon, such as Bonde dos 13 (B13), IFARA, and Família Terror do Amapá. These acronyms reveal the connection between gangs from the states of Acre, Amapá, Pará, and São Paulo.

In Roraima, the Primeiro Comando de Roraima (PCR) gang, which operated in the Agricultural Penitentiary of Monte Cristo, was incorporated into the PCC. In 2018, a prison break allowed members of the gangs to infiltrate the mining areas in Yanomami territory. As a result, the PCC strengthened its control over the Uraricoera River, the main route used by the gang to enter Indigenous lands. In Yanomami lands, the PCC took over existing mining structures and established new expansion fronts. Across the Brazil-Venezuela border, the PCC forged relations with criminal organizations in both countries, notably the Tren de Aragua, a Venezuelan megaband involved in mining activities and supplying Brazilian counterparts with weapons and ammunition.

Figure 3 Illegal mining in the Pan-Amazon

[1] "Crime Tribunals" are instances within Brazilian organized crime groups that judge offenses committed by their members, imposing penalties that include the death penalty.



Source: Instituto Mãe Crioula, available at: www.maecrioula.org.br

Although the PCC is dominant in the region, the CV also operates in mining areas, controlling entry via the Mucajaí River. In Roraima, the transnational nature of the illegal networks that involve drug trafficking, arms smuggling, mineral smuggling, and human trafficking demonstrates an intense spatial interaction, sparking interest from criminal groups. This new dynamic imposed by organized crime on Indigenous lands is a serious threat to the preservation of life and ancestry of these peoples, as the use of mercury contaminates rivers, which, in turn, contaminates fish, affecting the entire food chain. This results in malnutrition and the proliferation of epidemics, causing high mortality rates and resulting in a humanitarian crisis.

Illegal mining operations in Indigenous lands in Roraima are undergoing territorialization by armed groups. Traditional gold mining methods in the region have been replaced by a new system associated with the operation of criminal groups. Today, armed men monitor the entry and exit of people and vehicles, control commerce and brothels, hire precarious workers, invest in planes and helicopters, open clandestine airstrips, and expand illegal gold mining areas.

The relationship between drug trafficking and mining, with the mediation of criminal organizations, results in significant losses for the Brazilian state, which is losing its legitimacy and authority. Under the Bolsonaro administration, the relationship between organized crime and environmental crimes in the Amazon was strengthened, encouraging the invasion of environmental reserves and creating conditions for the growth of narco-mining. Simultaneously, criminal organizations expanded throughout the region, bringing violence deeper into the interior. In Jacareacanga, Pará, narco-mining became a direct threat to the Munduruku people. In this case, the areas exploited for mining became hubs for drug retail and trade.

Jacareacanga is a city within the operational reach of the Comando Vermelho (CV), and in recent years, it has become one of the most violent cities in the Amazon. During field research conducted in this region, it was possible to identify CV symbols scattered around the outskirts, and the testimonies of interviewees highlighted the relationship between this organized crime syndicate and the control of territories. This criminal group manages to supply mining zones with cocaine, transported

through the Transamazônica and Cuiabá-Santarém (BR-163) highways. Additionally, the drug also enters the mining areas by air, with planes using clandestine airstrips.

Regarding the airstrips, Itaituba stands out as a key city due to the large number of aircraft entering mining areas, and there have been police operations that seized drugs transported by PCC members. This dynamic highlight another definition of narco-mining, which involves using mining structures to supply the drug market at regional, national, and global levels. In this case, mining is not the end goal but a means of connecting drug trafficking networks.

Thus, addressing such a complex issue involving the relations established by narco-mining is not an easy task. The various ramifications of these two illegal activities create multiple possibilities and strategies for organizing and controlling territories. On the other hand, the difficulty the Brazilian state faces in reaching Indigenous lands exposes these groups to vulnerability, whether the Yanomami in Roraima, or the Munduruku in Jacareacanga and Itaituba. The dynamics of organized crime in the Amazon mean that all forest populations today are under some level of threat.

Final Remarks

In the current phase of capitalism, securing sources of precious metals, rare earth elements, and molecules found in areas with rich biodiversity is crucial for the expansion of the digital economy. A considerable portion of regions containing these resources is in tropical forest areas, home to thousands of Indigenous peoples worldwide. In South America, the richest of these areas is the Amazon. The world's largest tropical forest spans 60% of its area in Brazilian territory.

The vastness of the Amazon forest is not an uninhabited territory. Indigenous peoples have lived in these lands for thousands of years. The interest of both Brazilian national capital and international capital in the Amazon is not new; however, the demands of the high-tech economy have intensified this interest. Less developed forms of capitalist exploitation, such as logging, cattle ranching, and small-scale gold mining, continue to promote waves of occupation in the tropical forest, often clashing with Indigenous peoples.

Despite the Brazilian state's demarcation of a considerable portion of Indigenous lands, the presence of regulatory bodies and law enforcement is weak. Budgetary problems, along with the influence of economic interests and ideological positions favorable to the exploitation and acculturation of Indigenous peoples, have made it difficult to protect Indigenous lands and populations. The same Amazonian space coveted by the globalized economy and extractivism is also critical for transnational drug trafficking, especially the Andean cocaine trade towards Europe and, to a lesser extent, the U.S., Africa, and Asia.

Thus, in addition to facing harassment and violence from agribusiness and mining, Indigenous peoples in the Amazon are also under attack from both Brazilian and foreign organized crime groups. The entry of drug trafficking groups into territories already occupied by illegal activities, particularly gold mining, has led to the fusion of these activities into what is now called narco-mining. The economic logic of narco-mining follows principles described by the Political Economy of Drug-

Trafficking (PED), such as violent competition for territories and routes, the establishment of temporary alliances between illegal groups, and the exploitation of local populations.

Brazilian state actions are disjointed, insufficient, and influenced by political interests, economic profitability, and ideological principles. The repressive logic of the 'war on drugs' continues to be the approach used to combat drug trafficking and narco-mining in the Brazilian Amazon. From the PED perspective, it is known that the continued application of the 'war on drugs' logic does not weaken the illicit markets organized by drug trafficking, but rather promotes displacements, alliances, and the strengthening of organized crime groups.

The presence of Brazil's largest organized crime groups—PCC and CV—in the Amazon has spurred the formation and sophistication of local and regional armed illegal groups. The prison system in the Amazon region has followed the pattern of prisons in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where the CV and PCC originated. The Amazonian reproduction of the logic of organized crime in Southeast Brazil indicates that the profitability of drug trafficking, gold, and other illegal activities in the Amazon is of interest to the country's strongest groups. Continuing the fragility of the state's presence and regulatory bodies, along with the persistence of the repressive logic of the war on drugs, the trend is that violence against Indigenous peoples in the Amazon will continue and potentially increase in the coming years.

Indigenous peoples such as the Yanomami and Munduruku exemplify the destructive effects brought by the competition between organized crime groups. This competition adds to the historical violence perpetrated by extractivist capitalism and, today, by biotech capitalism. It is essential that this new chapter in the genocide of Amazonian Indigenous peoples be recognized and confronted as a specific phenomenon associated with the current phase of capitalist expansion. Without understanding the narco-mining phenomenon as a problem with its own rationale and logic, it will be impossible to design effective national and regional policies to tackle it and protect the Indigenous peoples and the vast wealth they safeguard.

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